

Report

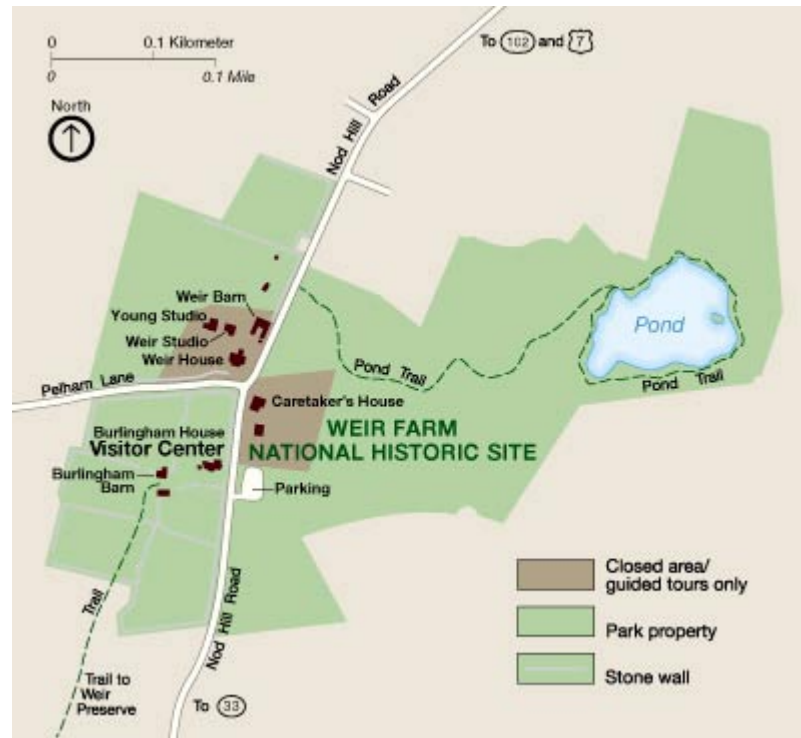
Weir Farm National Historic Site

■ 1.0 Site Description

The Weir Farm National Historic Site (NHS) was the summer country retreat and studio of American Impressionist painter J. Alden Weir (1852-1919). Designated a NHS in 1990, it is the only national park site in Connecticut and the only national park site dedicated to an American painter. The 60-acre site is maintained by the NPS with its private partner, the Weir Farm Trust. The site includes Weir's home, studio, barns and outbuildings, a Visitor Center, and a second studio built by the Weir's son-in-law, sculptor Mahonri Young. The surrounding landscape served as subject matter for many of Weir's paintings, and works of art by other American painters. Ranger-led tours of the studio are available and a Historic Paintings Sites Trail allows visitors to stand where the artists painted and compare paintings with the scene that inspired them. Other walking trails connect to abutting conservation properties. The Burlingham House Visitor Center, located approximately one-quarter mile from the Weir home, offers small exhibits and a video orientation to the site. All guided and self-guided tours leave from the Visitor Center. In addition, there are spring and summer art classes and several special events held throughout the year at the site, including a jazz concert, a holiday open house, naturalist programs, and art exhibitions. Because the Weir House is currently serving as a private residence for the lifetime tenants, artists Doris and Sperry Andrews, the holiday open house is the only period when the house is open to the general public.

The site is located in Ridgefield and Wilton, Connecticut, approximately midway between the Merritt Parkway and I-84 on Nod Hill Road, a public town-owned two-lane rural road. A map showing the location of the site and its various facilities is shown in Figure 1. Limited parking is provided across Nod Hill Road adjacent to the temporary Visitor Center.

Visitation to the site was approximately 15,000 visitors in 1999, the highest in the history of the site. Previously, visitation averaged 11,000 to 12,000 annually. Peak visitation is in May and October, lowest visitation occurs in January and February. According to the Superintendent, visitation is projected to reach 25,000 to 40,000 annually as the site matures.

Figure 1. Map of Weir Farm National Historic Site

■ 2.0 Existing ATS

All access to the Weir Farm NHS is currently by private vehicle, although Metro North commuter rail service is provided to the Branchville Station, approximately 1.25 miles from the site. Taxi service is available from the station to the site. The Superintendent indicated that greater use of commuter rail would be desirable, however nearly all visitors arrive by private auto. Otherwise there are currently no Alternative Transportation System (ATS) services either to or on the grounds of the Weir Farm NHS.

■ 3.0 ATS Needs

As indicated above, the Superintendent of Weir Farm NHS anticipates a significant growth in visitation in the future. The park plans to develop an off-site Visitor Center to support of the NHS and accommodate this growth. The Visitor Center will include an art gallery/museum, space for curatorial storage, and an administrative/maintenance facility. Development of these facilities offsite will minimize the potential for impacting historic resources on the present site. A 13-acre site for these facilities has been identified approximately one-half mile north of the NHS and Congress has appropriated \$2 million dollars for its purchase. Development plans call for automobile parking to be located at

the Visitor Center and bus parking at an as yet undetermined nearby satellite location. This will allow the NPS to better control the volume of vehicles with direct access to the Weir Farm property.

According to the Superintendent, at a minimum, it will take at least five years for these plans to be implemented. However, the feasibility of an offsite Visitor Center is dependent upon being able to provide a shuttle service between the proposed Visitor Center, the satellite parking location, and Weir Farm. The surrounding area is predominantly residential and abutting neighbors have already expressed concern over a growth in traffic on local roads which would be potentially generated by increased visitation at Weir Farm.

An analysis of potential shuttle options was prepared in December 1996 by the NPS Denver Service Center. This analysis considered five options, including some requiring a separate staging area approximately three miles from the site. The analysis concluded that current visitation does not warrant provision of shuttle services and that shuttles would only be justified when tour or school buses are visiting the site. At such time that demand exists, it might be possible to make arrangements with a local transit authority in Danbury or nearby school district to provide on-demand shuttle service. In the future, however, with a new Visitor Center and increased visitation, a scheduled shuttle system was considered to be more financially feasible. According to the analysis, "...a shuttle system may be critical for enhancing the visitor experience, protecting the farm setting, and reducing complaints from neighbors." Under such circumstances, a proposed option would be a year-round shuttle service from the new Visitor Center. Two shuttles with capacity of 25 to 27 passengers would be sufficient to transport a projected 40,000 annual visitors. Estimated cost per rider would be \$5.25 (1996 dollars). This cost could potentially be supported through a use fee charged to visitors.

■ 4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

Proposed expansion of facilities and concern over increased traffic, expressed by residential neighbors to the Weir Farm NHS, warrants consideration of ATS to support anticipated growth in future visitation. A shuttle service between an off-site Visitor Center and the Weir Farm facilities would facilitate the ability of the NHS to provide increased visitor activities while supporting the site's objective of minimizing interference with its historical properties.

■ 5.0 Persons Interviewed

Bob Fox, Superintendent, Weir Farm National Historic Site